



## Purifying the Heart, Unveiling the Truth: Understanding Al-Ghazālī's Epistemology

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### Abstract

Al-Ghazālī is one of the foremost thinkers in the tradition of Islamic thought. His life story has inspired many historians worldwide to document his journey. His interdisciplinary thinking has given rise to numerous works that explore his contributions from various scholarly perspectives. Although his ideas culminated in a philosophical product that diverged from the tradition of earlier philosophers, Al-Ghazālī could not entirely avoid employing philosophical logic in developing a philosophy of knowledge oriented towards unveiling the ultimate truth. This paper seeks to uncover Al-Ghazālī's philosophy of knowledge, particularly within the ontology and epistemology he developed. His philosophy of knowledge is rooted in a theological affirmation of God's oneness. Building upon this ontological foundation, Al-Ghazālī posits a single source of knowledge. Consequently, he opposes the compartmentalization of knowledge into distinct categories. Moreover, since knowledge emanates from the true substance of God, it attains a noble status in Al-Ghazālī's understanding. For Al-Ghazālī, authentic knowledge is what he terms *al-ilmu al-yaqini*, which can only be achieved through the illumination of the heart or *mukasyafah*. His concept of *al-ilmu al-yaqini* arises from his belief that the purpose of his scholarly journey is to uncover the substance of all realities or *haqiq al-umur*. His epistemological perspective is characterized by a strong monism, emphasizing that all knowledge ultimately derives from and leads back to the singular divine source.

**Keywords:** Al-Ghazālī's Philosophy; *Al-Ilmu Al-Yaqini*; Epistemological Perspective.

### Abstrak

*Al-Ghazali adalah salah satu pemikir terkemuka dalam tradisi pemikiran Islam. Cerita hidupnya telah menginspirasi begitu banyak sejarawan dunia mendokumentasikan perjalanannya. Gagasannya yang lintas disiplin telah memunculkan beragam karya yang menggali kontribusinya dari beragam perspektif keserjanaan. Meskipun gagasannya berujung pada satu produk filosofis yang menyimpang dari tradisi para filsuf sebelumnya, Al-Ghazali tidak sepenuhnya dapat menghindari penggunaan logika filosofis dalam mengembangkan filsafat pengetahuan yang berorientasi pada pengungkapan kebenaran tertinggi. Filsafat pengetahuannya berakar di dalam afirmasi teologi terhadap keesaan Tuhan. Konsekuensinya, dia menentang pengotakan pengetahuan ke dalam kategori-kategori yang berbeda. Lebih lanjut, karena memancar dari substansi yang sebenarnya, yaitu Tuhan, pengetahuan mendapatkan status terhormat di dalam pemahaman Al-Ghazali. Baginya, pengetahuan otentik adalah apa yang dia istilahkan sebagai al-ilmu al-yaqini, yang hanya bisa diraih melalui ketersingkapan hati atau mukasyafah. Konsepnya mengenai al-ilmu al-yaqini muncul dari keyakinan bahwa tujuan perjalanan keilmuannya adalah menyingkap substansi semua realitas atau haqiq al-umur. Perspektif epistemologisnya ditandai oleh monisme yang kuat, menekankan bahwa semua pengetahuan pada akhirnya muncul dari serta kembali kepada sumber tunggal yang abadi.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Al-Ilmu Al-Yaqini*; Filsafat Al-Ghazālī; Perspektif Epistemologis.

## INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, Al-Ghazālī is a prominent scholar and Islamic thinker whose intellectual legacy remains highly influential today. His contributions span various fields of knowledge. Al-

Ghazālī is known by numerous titles, ranging from a jurist, a theologian, a philosopher, to ultimately a Sufi. His influence is evident not only in the admiration he commands but also in the extensive critiques developed by scholars of his time and beyond.

For the followers of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah*, particularly those adhering to Imam Ash'ari's and Imam Maturidi's theological views, Al-Ghazālī is regarded as an authoritative reference in Islamic discourse. His title, "*Hujjat al-Islam*" (The Proof of Islam), reflects the Muslim community's appreciation for his contributions in establishing Islamic reasoning to counter deviant thoughts. His work, "*Ihya Ulum al-Din*," is considered pivotal and esteemed below the Qur'an and Hadith. It is indisputable that "*Ihya Ulum al-Din*" is one of the most frequently read Islamic texts, second only to the Qur'an in readership.<sup>1</sup>

Although Al-Ghazālī is later recognized as a Sufi towards the end of his life, his philosophical views never truly ceased. Al-Ghazālī made significant efforts to critique several philosophical ideas that he found to be inconsistent. Interestingly, as he acknowledged, Al-Ghazālī recognized some of the philosophical deviations only after studying them in depth. The pinnacle of his engagement with philosophy is marked by his work "*Maqasid al-Falasifah*" (The Intentions of the Philosophers). Subsequently, he produced another significant work titled "*Tabafut al-Falasifah*" (The Incoherence of the Philosophers), which records his offensive critique of the philosophers.

The objective of Al-Ghazālī in writing this second book is clear: to dismantle the authoritative claims of rationality (*al-'aql*) that philosophers had previously used as the sole basis for uncovering the knowledge of truth. Through this work, Al-Ghazālī aimed to highlight the limitations of reason, which he argued is not self-sufficient in explaining metaphysical objects and incapable of presenting a complete worldview.<sup>2</sup>

Although Al-Ghazālī provided sharp critiques of philosophy, he did not entirely reject it holistically. It becomes increasingly evident when Al-Ghazālī reviews various philosophical thoughts and his differing positions on each. His stringent stance was primarily directed towards philosophers who, in his view, encroached upon fundamental religious principles, such as those concerning divinity. Al-Ghazālī articulated several of their ideas, which subsequently led to his vehement opposition against them.<sup>3</sup>

For instance, Al-Ghazālī vehemently criticized philosophers who believed that Allah only knows universal matters, while particulars are beyond His knowledge. This view provoked strong condemnation from Al-Ghazālī and formed the basis for his accusation of heresy against these philosophers.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Al-Ghazālī deemed other philosophical views as justifications for certain philosophers' deviation from Islamic principles.

However, Al-Ghazālī did not dismiss the role of philosophy entirely, especially in matters that did not intersect with the core principles of Islam. This selective acceptance is evident in Al-Ghazālī's special regard for the science of logic. He famously stated, "Whoever does not know logic, their credibility in knowledge cannot be trusted".<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Imam Tabroni and Arifin Saefulloh, "Methodology of Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamaah in Writing the History of Islamic Culture," *Jurnal Riset Rumpun Agama Dan Filsafat* 1, no. 1 (2022): 09–18, <https://doi.org/10.55606/jurrafi.v1i1.2>.

<sup>2</sup> William Montgomery Watt, *Muslim Intellectual: A Study of Al-Ghazali* (University Press, 1963), 52.

<sup>3</sup> Imam Al-Ghazali, *Tabafut Al-Falasifah* (Dar al-Fikr, 1966), 81.

<sup>4</sup> Imam Al-Ghazali, *Al-Munqidz Min Adb-Dhalal* (Penerbit Republika, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Imam Al-Ghazali, *Mi'yarul Ilmi Fil Mantbiqi* (Darul Kutub, 2013), 5.

Al-Ghazālī, therefore, was not a thinker who entirely negated philosophy. Consequently, many scholars examining Al-Ghazālī's thought cannot overlook the philosophical dimensions within his works, including in the field of knowledge. Al-Ghazālī's dialectic with the ideas of Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, as well as his intellectual discussions with Islamic philosophers like Ibn Sina and Al-Farabi, clearly demonstrate the strong influence of philosophy on the construction of his thought.

Montgomery Watt explicitly highlights how Al-Ghazālī's skepticism was significantly influenced by philosophy. He notes the profound presence of Platonic thought in Al-Ghazālī's work, particularly in his skepticism, where he attempts to expose the limitations of reason by using it as a foundation to uncover a more transcendental ontology of knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

Al-Ghazālī's engagement with philosophy is also evident in his dialectic with Ibn Arabi and the Platonic tradition, particularly in their discussions of darkness. Al-Ghazālī and Platonic philosophers like Ibn Arabi share a common understanding of the concept of darkness, but differ on its existence. While the Platonic philosophy, as Ibn Arabi represents, views darkness as nothingness, merely the shadow of the divine light, Al-Ghazālī is not a nihilist. He believes that darkness is an existence created by God. For Al-Ghazālī, darkness is not the absence of being but rather a necessary possibility required by the ongoing actions of God.<sup>7</sup>

Due to the profound influence of philosophy in Al-Ghazālī's thought, delving into his ideas reveals how his scholarship is built on a solid foundation of epistemology and ontology. On this philosophical foundation, we can observe how Al-Ghazālī produced significant ideas recorded in his major works. Even as a Sufi, some scholars regard him as unique due to the philosophical dimension that colors his spiritual quest.

As a prominent figure with a substantial intellectual legacy, Al-Ghazālī has attracted the attention of many scholars. His illustrious life history has piqued the interest of historians worldwide, prompting them to document his life's journey.<sup>8</sup> His brilliant and interdisciplinary thinking has inspired numerous scholarly works from various academic perspectives.<sup>9</sup>

Al-Ghazālī's philosophy of knowledge has become a focal point of research.<sup>10</sup> Although the outcomes of his ideas often diverge from the tradition of previous philosophers, Al-Ghazālī could not avoid employing philosophical logic in developing a philosophy of knowledge aimed at uncovering the highest truth. This paper seeks to uncover Al-Ghazālī's philosophy of knowledge, particularly within the framework of ontology and epistemology that he developed. Before discussing Al-Ghazālī's philosophy of expertise in these two dimensions, the following section provides a brief overview of ontology and epistemology as part of the philosophy of science and knowledge, which is the main topic of this paper. Meanwhile, Al-Ghazālī's biography is not explicitly detailed here, considering his extensive life coverage in almost all writings that address his thoughts.

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<sup>6</sup> Watt, *Muslim Intellectual*, 52.

<sup>7</sup> Massimo Campanini, *Al-Ghazali and the Divine* (Routledge, 2019), 124.

<sup>8</sup> W. R. W. Gardner, *Al-Ghazali* (Christian literature society for India, 1919); Watt, *Muslim Intellectual*.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Moad, "Introduction to the Book Symposium: Coherence of the Incoherence: Between Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd on Nature and the Cosmos," *Theology and Science* 0, no. 0 (2025): 1–4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2025.2514307>; Sophia Vasalou, *Al-Ghazali and the Idea of Moral Beauty* (Routledge, 2022); Campanini, *Al-Ghazali and the Divine*.

<sup>10</sup> Nabil Yasien Mohamed, *Ghazali's Epistemology: A Critical Study of Doubt and Certainty* (Routledge, 2024).

## METHODS

This study employs a literature review approach<sup>11</sup> to elaborate on and explore Al-Ghazālī's epistemology. The primary sources used for analysis are Al-Ghazālī's original works that address his epistemological framework. Two primary references are *Ihya Ulum al-Din* and *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*.

Various other works by Al-Ghazālī and writings by other scholars discussing his thought are also utilized to provide a richer and more in-depth perspective.

The analysis in this literature study is conducted chronologically by outlining the genealogy of Al-Ghazālī's epistemological thought. Furthermore, a conceptual analysis is also undertaken by identifying specific concepts or themes in Al-Ghazālī's major works that discuss or relate to his epistemological ideas.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Philosophy of Science: Ontology and Epistemology

Philosophy remains an enduring field of study, particularly as the era of science and knowledge strengthens. Despite concerns that philosophy might be marginalized with the rise of positivism in science, it has continued to develop. Science increasingly demonstrates its inability to sever itself from the philosophical roots that preceded it.

Philosophy existed before the emergence of the era of science. The 6th century BCE marked the advent of philosophy in Greece, a region that did not possess the same high intellectual traditions as ancient Egypt. Perhaps for this reason, the emergence of philosophy in Greece, rather than Egypt, is considered one of the Greek miracles.<sup>12</sup> From this land emerged great philosophers such as Socrates and Aristotle, whose ideas have influenced almost the entire structure of modern human intellectuality.

Philosophy itself is challenging to define, according to many scholars. Especially when related to science, there is debate about whether the two entities are different or fundamentally inseparable. Despite the ongoing debate regarding their relationship, philosophy and science currently occupy different domains. Nonetheless, philosophy precedes science, as evidenced by philosophical questions that remain unanswered by science and thus are left to intellectual inquiry. Where science cannot provide answers, philosophy finds its domain.<sup>13</sup>

But what exactly is philosophy? As previously mentioned, defining philosophy is not an easy task. Nevertheless, philosophers and scholars have developed many definitions of philosophy. Two definitions are worth mentioning here: informal and formal. Informally, philosophy is a set of attitudes and beliefs about life and the universe that are generally accepted without question. Formally, philosophy is the critical examination of these cherished beliefs and attitudes.<sup>14</sup>

Referring to these definitions, one of the core aspects of philosophical thought is its tendency to critically examine and question all life phenomena that were previously accepted

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<sup>11</sup> Maria J. Grant and Andrew Booth, "A Typology of Reviews: An Analysis of 14 Review Types and Associated Methodologies," *Health Information and Libraries Journal* 26, no. 2 (2009): 91–108, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-1842.2009.00848.x>.

<sup>12</sup> Kees Bertens, *Sejarah Filsafat Yunani* (Kanisius, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Alex Rosenberg, *Philosophy of Science: A Contemporary Introduction* (Routledge, 2005), 2.

<sup>14</sup> Harold Titus, *Living Issues in Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1993), 12.

without scrutiny. This lack of critical inquiry stems from various factors, including the perception that certain phenomena should not be questioned because they are collectively accepted, and individuals are discouraged from challenging them.

Philosophical uncritical attitudes are based on various factors. In early Greek society, and many other places, an uncritical attitude emerged due to the weaker role of reason compared to the role of myths, which were believed to answer various issues. Thus, the era when philosophy emerged, where critical attitudes were born, was marked by the triumph of reason or logos over myths previously accepted axiomatically or taken for granted.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, in the modern era, the philosopher Roger Bacon introduced four idols of the mind, which he argued hindered critical attitudes in humans. These idols are the idol of the tribe, the idol of the cave, the idol of the marketplace, and the idol of the theater.<sup>16</sup>

Each of these idols inhibits our critical attitudes toward issues. The first is the tribe's idol, where we are more likely to accept ideas from those who share our tribal or group background. This attitude arises because everyone's character tends to be influenced by their tribal and familial background. This prevents objectivity from those with different tribal backgrounds from ours.

Second is the idol of the cave, where many are shackled by ego and overconfidence in their abilities. As a result, the truth from others is obscured by the desire to accept personal truth over objectively accepting it from others. This idol often underlies the tendency to claim or monopolize truth. The third idol, the idol of the marketplace, involves attitudes and thoughts influenced by familiar everyday words or terms. This binds our reasoning to those products, preventing critical examination. This is similar to the tendency of some in Indonesian society lately, who are influenced by narratives proliferated on social media, such as enemies of Islam, anti-Islam, Pancasila, anti-Pancasila, and so on. These narratives are then readily used to build spurious arguments not based on critical thinking.

The fourth idol is the idol of the theater. This attitude emerges because some people tend to accept truths that align with or represent the interests of their party and beliefs. Partisan thoughts contaminate those trapped in this idol without critically questioning them.<sup>17</sup>

The relationship between science and philosophy cannot be separated. Historically, philosophy preceded the birth of science, and knowledge itself falls within the realm of philosophical inquiry. The branch of philosophy that studies knowledge is called epistemology. The term epistemology comes from the Greek words "episteme" (knowledge) and "logos" (theory).<sup>18</sup> Thus, epistemology linguistically means the theory of knowledge. The core questions of epistemology include the sources of knowledge, what we currently know, and how we can be certain of the knowledge we possess.

The concept of epistemology arose because the scope of philosophical inquiry is vast. Therefore, philosophers classify philosophical inquiries into several categories. Two main branches of philosophical investigations give rise to two principal branches of philosophy: ontology and epistemology. Epistemology examines the philosophical domain related to knowledge and the justification of knowledge.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bertens, *Sejarah Filsafat Yunani*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> Jeremiah Hackett, *Roger Bacon and the Sciences: Commemorative Essays 1996* (BRILL, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Titus, *Living Issues in Philosophy*, 191.

<sup>18</sup> Milton Hunnex, *Peta Filsafat* (Mizan Publika, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> James Ladyman, *Understanding Philosophy of Science* (Routledge, 2012), 5.

Meanwhile, ontology is a branch of philosophy often synonymous with metaphysics. Some differentiate the two terms but acknowledge their similarities, particularly in exploring the highest reality. Ontology, like metaphysics, is a branch of philosophy that discusses the most universal principles of any reality or the fundamental nature of any reality.<sup>20</sup>

Epistemology, although distinct from ontology, is deeply interconnected. To understand the reliable sources of knowledge, one must employ epistemological methods. Searching for knowledge sources in epistemological discourse has led to two primary schools of thought in philosophy: rationalism and empiricism. These philosophical perspectives on knowledge stem from ontological beliefs about the essence of knowledge itself.

Thus, efforts to discuss knowledge epistemologically cannot be detached from its ontological dimension. This also applies when talking about the philosophy of knowledge developed by Imam Al-Ghazālī. Al-Ghazālī's epistemology is rooted in his ontological view of knowledge. Hence, this discussion on Al-Ghazālī's philosophy of knowledge will focus on both these philosophical dimensions: ontology and epistemology.

### Ontology of Knowledge According to Al-Ghazālī

Al-Ghazālī introduced the concept of knowledge about essence (*haqaiq al-umur*), which he called al-Ilmu al-Yaqini (specific knowledge). To understand Ilmu Yaqini, one must read his ideas in the book *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*. Al-Ghazālī positioned *Ilmu Yaqini* as ontologically reliable knowledge compared to other types. According to Al-Ghazālī,<sup>21</sup> *Ilmu Yaqini* is knowledge that can reveal all realities without being contaminated by skepticism and devoid of potential fallacies and prejudices.

Al-Ghazālī's concept of *Ilmu Yaqini* is based on his belief that scholarly exploration aims to uncover the substance of all realities (*haqaiq al-umur*). *Ilmu Yaqini* is the tool needed to reveal this substance. Al-Ghazālī's philosophy of knowledge is based on the conviction that Allah is the source of all knowledge.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, he opposed the view that compartmentalizes knowledge, as all knowledge fundamentally originates from Allah. This view is rooted in Al-Ghazālī's theological belief that Allah is the *prima causa* of all life forms.

Since all knowledge emanates from the true substance of Allah, knowledge holds the highest status in Al-Ghazālī's understanding. In explaining the nobility of knowledge, Al-Ghazālī rationalizes this by highlighting the noble attributes of Allah. Knowledge is one of Allah's noble attributes, reflecting the views of the Asy'ariyah school.<sup>23</sup> Since knowledge represents Allah's nobility, all living beings possessing knowledge also share a reflection of this nobility.

In Al-Ghazālī's view, knowledge holds an exalted position due to its inherent nobility. Unlike other objects, the nobility of knowledge is absolute, not dependent on any other attribute. To elucidate this, Al-Ghazālī provides a detailed explanation. According to him, all cherished and desirable things (*an-nafis al-marhub*) fall into three categories: 1) Sought for their substance, 2) Sought for reasons beyond their substance, and 3) Sought for both reasons.

<sup>20</sup> Titus, *Living Issues in Philosophy*, 20.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Ghazali, *Al-Munqidh Min Adh-Dhalal*, 64.

<sup>22</sup> M. Bahri Ghazali, "Epistemologi Al-Ghazali," *Al Qalam* 18, nos. 90–91 (2001): 174–93, <https://doi.org/10.32678/alqalam.v18i90-91.1469>.

<sup>23</sup> Murni Murni, "Konsep Ma'rifatullah Menurut Al-Ghazali (Suatu Kajian Tentang Implementasi Nilai-Nilai Akhlak al-Karimah)," *Ar-Raniry: International Journal of Islamic Studies* 2, no. 1 (2015): 1, <https://doi.org/10.22373/jar.v2i1.7420>.

In the first category, Al-Ghazālī illustrates eschatological happiness as a target sought for its substance. The second category includes items like money, valued not for their substance but for their agreed utility in transactions. Objects sought for their substance hold a higher status than those sought for external reasons.

Knowledge, according to Al-Ghazālī, falls into the third category. It is sought for its substance (*dzat*) and external considerations (*lighairihi*). Substantially, knowledge symbolizes the noble attribute of Allah, making its acquisition inherently pleasurable. Externally, knowledge serves as a means to draw closer to the trustworthy source of knowledge, Allah. Moreover, knowledge enables one to attain worldly happiness. Thus, Al-Ghazālī argues, knowledge is the foundation of joy in both realms: this world and the eschatological or afterlife.<sup>24</sup>

### **Al-Ghazālī's Dual Classification of Knowledge**

Some argue that Al-Ghazālī embraced the kind of monism, suggesting that he challenges the dichotomy of knowledge based on the belief that all knowledge ultimately comes from Allah. The essence of all knowledge is derived from a single entity, Allah.<sup>25</sup> However, this does not mean Al-Ghazālī treats all knowledge equally.

Al-Ghazālī indeed creates a hierarchy of knowledge. In his work, *Ihya Ulumiddin* categorizes knowledge into two types. The first is the science of Mu'amalah (*ilm al-mu'amalah*), which is practical knowledge that needs to be practiced to uncover truths. The second is the science of Mukasyafah (*ilm al-mukasyafah*); knowledge purely oriented towards uncovering truths. He wrote:<sup>26</sup>

فاعلم أنه قسمان علم مكاشفة وعلم معاملة فالقسم الأول علم المكاشفة وهو علم الباطن وذلك غاية العلوم

The science of Mu'amalah is meant to be disseminated and transmitted as it guides humans towards achieving true knowledge through necessary actions. *Ihya Ulumiddin* contains various explanations emphasizing the harmony between knowledge and practice. Ilmu Mu'amalah involves the causality dimension of deeds and knowledge.

For Al-Ghazālī, Ilmu Mukasyafah occupies a higher position than Ilmu Mu'amalah. He states, "*Ilmu Mukasyafah is the ultimate goal of seekers of God and the focus of thought for those of the truthful*".<sup>27</sup> Ilmu Mu'amalah is merely an instrument enabling one to reach the level of Mukasyafah.

Nevertheless, Al-Ghazālī does not delve deeply into Ilmu Mukasyafah, reasoning that most people cannot grasp its substance. This principle is also adhered to by the prophets, who provided only illustrative and general discussions without explicitly focusing on it.

It is crucial to understand that the term Ilmu Mu'amalah used by Al-Ghazālī here differs from its usage in the context of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). In fiqh, Mu'amalah pertains to social interactions governed by religious guidelines, allowing broader human interpretation. In contrast, Al-Ghazālī's Mu'amalah in a Sufi context deals with spiritual practices to achieve eschatological goals. He divides Ilmu Mu'amalah into two parts:

1. Ilmu Mu'amalah focuses on physical deeds (*a'malul jawarih*).
2. Ilmu Mu'amalah focuses on inner deeds or the heart (*a'malul qulub*).

<sup>24</sup> Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Ahmad Al-Ghazali, *Ihya Ulumuddin*, vol. 1 (Dar al Minhaj, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Ghazali, "Epistemologi Al-Ghazali."

<sup>26</sup> Al-Ghazali, *Ihya Ulumuddin*, vol. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Al-Ghazali, *Ihya Ulumuddin*, vol. 1.

The first category is divided into sacred and profane categories, while the second is classified into praiseworthy (mahmud) and blameworthy (madzmum) categories.

Despite placing Allah as the source of all knowledge, Al-Ghazālī acknowledges categorizing knowledge into various parts with differing significances. This segmentation becomes evident when Al-Ghazālī categorizes truth-seekers into four groups: theologians (mutakallimun), esoterics (batiniyyah), philosophers, and Sufis.<sup>28</sup> Each group represents different categories of knowledge, critically evaluated by Al-Ghazālī to demonstrate how each reveals the truth.<sup>29</sup>

Al-Ghazālī prefers one in his examination of Ilmu Mu'amalah and the positions of different truth-seeking groups. For instance, when he states that internal Ilmu Mu'amalah is divided into praiseworthy and blameworthy categories, he implicitly suggests that some internal knowledge is condemnable and should be avoided. Similarly, Al-Ghazālī's discussion of the views of theologians, esoterics, philosophers, and Sufis shows his special appreciation for Sufism, which, in his testimony, was the intermediary that saved his spiritual journey towards the truth by unifying his heart with Allah. Al-Ghazālī states that Sufis are "people of states, not people of words" (arbabul ahwal, not ashabul aqwal).<sup>30</sup>

While Al-Ghazālī believes that all knowledge originates from Allah's truth, his classification of knowledge indicates a fragmentation and hierarchy within the knowledge domains. Therefore, contrary to Ghazālī,<sup>31</sup> who views Al-Ghazālī's thoughts as monochotomic, this analysis concludes that Al-Ghazālī does not entirely dismiss the dichotomy of knowledge.

### Epistemology of Al-Ghazālī: Questioning the Sources of Knowledge

Al-Ghazālī, a prominent thinker and theologian in the Islamic tradition, presents a profound and dramatic exploration of his quest for truth in his autobiographical work, "*Al-Munqidh min ad-Dalal*" ("The Deliverer from Error"). In his intellectual and spiritual journey, Al-Ghazālī engaged deeply with various scholarly communities and schools of thought to critique and thoroughly understand their epistemologies. His critiques were thus founded on a solid basis of knowledge acquired from these engagements. Al-Ghazālī recounts:

*"Since my early youth, since I entered puberty before the age of 20 and up to my current age of 50, I have delved into this deep ocean, navigating its treacherous waves with the bravery of a fearless soul, not as a coward filled with fear. I have walked through every darkness, faced every difficulty, explored every abyss, investigated the doctrines of various sects, and uncovered the secrets of each group to distinguish between truth and falsehood, between the follower and the innovator. I have not criticized the followers of esoteric beliefs without also studying the aspects of their mysticism. Similarly, I have not critiqued the textualists without seeking to understand their textual conclusions. I have not examined philosophers without aiming to grasp the essence of their philosophy, nor theologians without striving to observe the pinnacle of their discussions and debates. I have not scrutinized the Sufis without committing to uncovering the secrets of their spiritual clarity, nor the devout worshippers without analyzing where the essence of their worship leads. I have not investigated the heretics who deny the attributes of God without uncovering the reasons behind their audacity in negating God's attributes and their heresy".<sup>32</sup>*

<sup>28</sup> Al-Ghazali, *Al-Munqidh Min Adb-Dhalal*, 69.

<sup>29</sup> Watt, *Muslim Intellectual*, 51.

<sup>30</sup> Al-Ghazali, *Al-Munqidh Min Adb-Dhalal*, 102.

<sup>31</sup> Ghazali, "Epistemologi Al-Ghazali."

<sup>32</sup> Al-Ghazali, *Al-Munqidh Min Adb-Dhalal*, 62.

This testimony underscores Al-Ghazālī's critiques of various epistemologies, which were not born from ignorance but from profound engagement with the knowledge systems he examined. His epistemological framework emerged from a dialectical process involving the methodologies developed by scholars across multiple disciplines, which he scrutinized critically.

To strengthen his arguments, Al-Ghazālī exposed several inconsistencies among thinkers who, in his view, failed to grasp the essence of truth. According to Al-Ghazālī, accurate knowledge (*al-ilm al-yaqīni*) is derived from God and can reveal the essence of reality. Intriguingly, Al-Ghazālī often utilized explanations from the scholars he critiqued, illustrating his epistemological approach's complexity and eclectic nature. Some scholars argue that Al-Ghazālī's epistemology combines various explanations, including empiricism, rationalism, and revelation.<sup>33</sup>

Philosophy significantly influenced Al-Ghazālī's thought, despite his critical stance towards it. Montgomery Watt suggests that Al-Ghazālī's vital and skeptical attitude emerged soon after his introduction to philosophy. For example, Al-Ghazālī's discussion of the sun's apparent size compared to the earth draws on philosophical debates predating him. However, it remains uncertain if he is directly engaged in these works.<sup>34</sup>

The impact of philosophers like Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina (Avicenna) on Al-Ghazālī's thought is undeniable. Even though he critiqued their philosophies, as evidenced in his work "*Tahafut al-Falasifah*" (The Incoherence of the Philosophers), their ideas shaped his intellectual framework. For instance, Al-Ghazālī appreciated Ibn Sina's notion that the world is a realm of intellectual freedom and creativity, yet he extended this idea to deconstruct Ibn Sina's philosophy.<sup>35</sup>

Al-Ghazālī's epistemology is crucial in two aspects: methodological and the instruments through which humans acquire knowledge. Central to his view is the belief that actual knowledge originates from God and is free from errors, enabling humans to understand the essence of reality. He termed this specific knowledge as "*ilm al-yaqīni*."

Al-Ghazālī's epistemological concept of '*ilm al-yaqīni*' (specific knowledge) cannot be separated from his skeptical method. Indeed, Al-Ghazālī was a skeptic regarding the truth of specific established knowledge axiomatically accepted by humanity. Once again, Al-Ghazālī's testimony in *al-Munqidh min al-Dhalal* is a highly informative source elucidating how his skepticism developed.<sup>36</sup>

Al-Ghazālī's skeptical stance emerged amidst the confusion of confronting various truth claims presented by different groups within Islam. Understandably, during Al-Ghazālī's time, religious debates were intensely contested among groups, each asserting their position as the

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<sup>33</sup> Surni Kadir, "Comparative Study Of Al-Ghazali Thought and Ibn Rushd in the Perspective of Islamic Theology," *International Journal of Health, Economics, and Social Sciences (IJHESS)* 6, no. 3 (2024): 3; Refinal et al., "Epistemology of Knowledge: Bridging Western and Islamic Thought," *Solo International Collaboration and Publication of Social Sciences and Humanities* 3, no. 01 (2025): 01, <https://doi.org/10.61455/sicopus.v3i01.250>; Sultan Mujahidin, "The Supremacy of Revelation over Reason: Al-Ghazali's Critique of Rationalist Philosophy in Tahafut Al-Falasifah," *Islamic Thought Review* 2, no. 2 (2024): 151–62, <https://doi.org/10.30983/itr.v2i2.8838>.

<sup>34</sup> Watt, *Muslim Intellectual*, 51.

<sup>35</sup> Campanini, *Al-Ghazali and the Divine*.

<sup>36</sup> Abd al Rahim Bin al Husain; al Iraqi, *Al Mughni "an Haml al Asfar Juz 1 : Fi al Asfar Fi Takbrij Ma Fi al Ahya" Min al Akbbar* (Maktabah Dar Thairiyah, 1995).

most truthful. Al-Ghazālī provides an insightful review of this situation in the preface of his book *al-Munqidh min al-Dhalal*:

*"My dear fellow believer, you have asked me to discuss the essence of knowledge, its secrets, and the errors of various sects and their underlying principles. I shall recount my experiences in purifying the truth amidst the pulls of different sects, each with its contradictory paths and procedures. I will describe to you how I mustered the courage to rise from the valley of blind adherence to the surface of keen discernment, what I initially gleaned from the science of theology, and what I later despised in the methods of the Ta'limites who failed to grasp the truth by following an Imam. I will explain my disillusionment with philosophical methods and how I found solace in the approach of Sufism. Furthermore, I will recount my intense efforts in observing the words of those who possess the truth, what diverted me from teaching in Baghdad despite the abundance of students, and what prompted my return to Nisapur after a prolonged stay in Baghdad. I begin to respond to your request, considering your desire. I invoke Allah's help, surrendering myself to Him, seeking His assistance, and relying on Him: Know—may Allah guide you rightly and soften your heart to follow the truth—that the differences among people in religion and belief, as well as the divergences within sects and their contradictory methods, form a deep ocean in which most people drown. Only a few are saved from it. Each group claims to be the saved sect, 'each faction rejoices in what it possesses.'*<sup>37</sup>

The emergence of diverse schools of thought and sects during Al-Ghazālī's time captured his attention not merely in exploring the truth claims of each, but also led him to question the existential dimension of his beliefs. Al-Ghazālī's skepticism, even regarding the existence of his knowledge, stemmed from the conviction that the essence of truth cannot be plural, *innal haqiqah la tata'addadu*.<sup>38</sup> Thus, Al-Ghazālī can be regarded as a monistic thinker, positing that only one substance precedes its particular parts.<sup>39</sup>

This line of thought arises from Al-Ghazālī's ontology of knowledge, which places Allah as the sole source of all knowledge. Moreover, Al-Ghazālī rationalized that since there is only one truth, there can only be one method to attain it. This is how Al-Ghazālī presented his concept of *'ilm al-yaqini* (specific knowledge), as a reliable method to achieve the essence of truth.

Al-Ghazālī questioned several claims by thinkers from various intellectual traditions to strengthen his argument. First, he doubted the credibility of the realists and rationalists who regarded the senses and reason as the sources of knowledge. Here, Al-Ghazālī's skepticism operated by assuming that only empirical knowledge (*al-hisriyah*) and rational knowledge (*al-aqliyyah*) have credibility.

*"I thus commenced my earnest endeavor to verify empirical objects and reason. I analyzed whether I could cultivate skepticism within myself regarding this knowledge. This skepticism persisted for a considerable time until I reached a point where I could not tolerate placing trust even in sensory knowledge".*<sup>40</sup>

Al-Ghazālī questioned how sensory knowledge could be considered credible when even the eye, which possesses the strongest sensory capability, can err in perceiving the essence of an object. He illustrated this with examples: the eye perceives a shadow as stationary, yet experiments reveal that the shadow moves gradually and continuously. Similarly, the eye sees a star as a small object the size of a dinar, while astronomical arguments demonstrate that stars are larger than the Earth.

<sup>37</sup> Al-Ghazali, *Al-Munqidh Min Adb-Dhalal*, 60.

<sup>38</sup> al Iraqi, *Al Mughni 'an Haml al Asfar Juz 1*.

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Schaffer, "Monism: The Priority of the Whole," *The Philosophical Review* 119, no. 1 (2010): 31–76, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-2009-025>.

<sup>40</sup> Al-Ghazali, *Al-Munqidh Min Adb-Dhalal*, 65.

At this stage, Al-Ghazālī's skepticism culminated in the argument that sensory knowledge lacks credibility. Who then judges the unreliability of sensory knowledge? The answer is the faculty of reason (*hakim akal*).<sup>41</sup> Consequently, Al-Ghazālī posited that reason can grasp knowledge with greater credibility than human senses. Rational and logical knowledge, according to Al-Ghazālī, is primary knowledge that no one can deny. He provided examples such as "Ten is greater than three" and "Affirmation and negation cannot be attributed to the same object simultaneously," which are fundamental propositions everyone accepts. However, Al-Ghazālī then engaged in an imaginary dialogue between the senses and reason to reveal the limitations of reason:

*"The senses ask: How can you feel secure that your trust in reason is not the same as your former trust in the senses? You once believed in me, and then the judge of reason came and disproved me. If it were not for the judge of reason, you would have continued to believe in me. Who knows, beyond the capacity of reason, another judge may emerge who, when it appears, will invalidate the judgments of reason just as the judge of reason invalidated the judgments of the senses. The absence of knowledge of another judge does not mean its impossibility".<sup>42</sup>*

In this imaginary dialogue, Al-Ghazālī found himself at a loss. For a moment, he doubted the validity of reason. During his search for an answer regarding the credibility of reason, Al-Ghazālī experienced a period of unconsciousness that lasted approximately two months. During this time, he acknowledged being overwhelmed by pseudo-analogical thoughts (*safsathab*). Eventually, his confidence in rational knowledge was restored through the help of Allah. This marked Al-Ghazālī's turning point towards trusting the Sufī method as the most reliable way to uncover knowledge.

This does not imply that Al-Ghazālī rejected rational knowledge (*aqliyah*). Previously, he believed that the clarity of argumentation was the foundation of sensible understanding. However, after his period of *safsathab*, he introduced the concept of the heart's illumination by divine light as a means to purify knowledge.

Al-Ghazālī expanded the basis of rational knowledge beyond mere argumentative reasoning to include aspects Allah gave, namely, light (*annur*). This divine light, he argued, is the key to most knowledge. According to Al-Ghazālī, those who believe that the unveiling of knowledge relies solely on logical argumentation are limiting the vastness of Allah's mercy.

According to Al-Ghazālī, the Prophet Muhammad was once asked about the meaning of *yashrah* (to expand or to make wide). The Prophet responded that it refers to Allah illuminating the heart with light. This illumination is indicated by a person's detachment from worldly life and return to the afterlife.<sup>43</sup>

In this context, Al-Ghazālī introduces the heart as a source of knowledge that enables one to attain ontological truth, specifically the knowledge of Allah. Thus, Al-Ghazālī delineates three hierarchical sources of expertise. First is knowledge derived from the senses (*bisriyah*). Second is knowledge obtained through reason (*aqliyyah*). The third, and highest, source is the heart, which can lead one to true knowledge through *kashfiyah* (unveiling or spiritual insight).

## CONCLUSION

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<sup>41</sup> Al-Ghazali, *Al-Munqidh Min Adb-Dhalal*, 66.

<sup>42</sup> Al-Ghazali, *Al-Munqidh Min Adb-Dhalal*, 67.

<sup>43</sup> Al-Ghazali, *Al-Munqidh Min Adb-Dhalal*, 115.

Despite accusations from some quarters that Al-Ghazālī is responsible for the decline of philosophy within the Islamic intellectual tradition, his philosophical contributions remain significant. Al-Ghazālī's epistemology, while influenced by Greek philosophy, has made substantial contributions to the development of Islamic philosophy. His ontology, which emphasizes God as the ultimate source of knowledge, underpins his monistic epistemology, which is essentially monochotomic.

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